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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the inclusion of computer-based writing assignments in literature and writing courses, citing as objectives for students the fostering of collaboration; the cultivation of scholarly ideals; and the exploration of issues, ideas, and literature from varying perspectives. It explains how the instructor developed assignments through reading "Computers in Composition" and other journals, through attendance at computer-assisted instruction workshops at regional and national conferences, by following discussions on MBU (Megabyte University) and other electronic lists, and through trial and error. The paper presents various sample writing assignments (using WordPerfect) for different classes in American Literature, such as a poetry explication assignment, a romantic fiction group project, and a paired letter exchange. Samples of student writing for the assignments are included with the paper, as are selected group e-mail compositions. (TB)

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E-Mail and Literature Instruction

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E-MAIL AND ENGLISH CLASSES: A CYBERSPACE WRITING PARTNERS' CONFERENCE
SUNY MORRISVILLE, MARCH 2, 1995

Shortly after I had become committed to the use of the word processor for my own writing as a columnist for the local newspaper, I recognized that the same advantages I enjoyed, my writing students at Tidewater Community College could enjoy as well. In fact, I wrote the proposal that led to our first purchase of computers for the English department. Nearly a decade since that discovery, most of my students arrive with some type of computing experience and often with proficiency.

For the past five years, computers have been available through the college for occasional instruction, recently augmented by a networked area with WordPerfect, Pegasus mail, and since January 1995, Daedalus software for real-time conferencing. Since then, I have been trying to find ways to apply some of the pedagogical approaches I value to the new technology. Through reading of *Computers in Composition* and other journals, through attendance at computer-assisted-instruction workshops at regional and national conferences, by following the discussions on MBU and other electronic lists, and through trial and error in our computer lab, I have developed several assignments that I like well enough to continue to revise them and to show you today.

My objectives in general are to foster collaboration; to have students take themselves and their classmates seriously as scholars; and to have students see issues, ideas, and literature from varying perspectives. For most of these assignments, I am more interested in exploration of ideas than in writing for formal evaluation. If the assignments succeeded in strengthening students' thinking skills, then their eventual writing would be informed by that awareness.

Keep in mind that these assignments were developed when the only software we had available was WordPerfect and networked Pegasus mail. Since that time, we have obtained a trial use of Daedalus, which I now use regularly for real-time conferencing with InterChange and which has superseded many of my e-mail assignments. Nevertheless, I still use Pegasus mail for a number of assignments.

Poetry Explication Assignment, American Literature II, Fall 1994

For the second semester of an American literature survey course, I wanted students to write about poetry in a public forum, thereby committing themselves to peer review but not to a grade. The first part of the assignment, therefore, requires that they focus on an image in a poem they all have read and e-mail their analysis to the entire class. The second part requires that students read their classmates' postings, find one they feel strongly about, and respond to it by writing a letter to the student whose explication impressed them. The sample from Theodore Roethke's "I Knew a Woman" brought responses from several classmates. The student who wrote the explication was an "average" student whose confidence was bolstered by the praise from classmates.

Romantic Fiction Group Project, American Literature II, Fall 1993

This multipart assignment for the second half of the American literature survey was rather complicated but worked out well. Students collaborated for discussion and writing on a common issue. They used electronic mail to send their collaborative writings to the whole class, giving the whole class an additional source for information for their papers. Students were required to cite their classmates' postings in their own final research papers. A few students said that incorporating their classmates' work was a bit of a stretch, but they all managed to find something they could use. This convoluted process did indeed establish a community of scholars in the American literature survey class.

CS&150&5

Paired Letter Exchange, American Literature II, Spring 1995

Here students were assigned partners with whom they exchanged questions about the readings. Then they answered the questions. A third part of the assignment, not illustrated here, had each person write a thank you

note back to the person who answered the question. My intention was for students to define the areas they considered important and to think about the literature critically and to respond to each other seriously.

Definition Discussion Assignment, English 111, Fall 1994

This unannounced writing assignment for English 111 used electronic discussion groups for collaboration. First, each person in the group defined an assigned term (fire, wave, snack, park) and sent that definition to the rest of the group. Each person was then required to read all the definitions of that term and to synthesize similarities and differences in the various definitions and then to comment on the significance. I hoped that students would become more aware of denotation and connotation as well as individual perceptions of meaning.

English 242-American Literature II Poetry Explication Assignment Reiss- April 1994

Explication

Write a short explication, about 150 words, of the poem noted. Focus on a particular image that you find striking and that seems especially important to the poem's theme, being sure to identify the theme. Send the explication by electronic mail to the entire class. Spend about an hour on this assignment.

Reaction

Read the electronic mail explications. Find one that you agree or disagree with. Write a 75-to-100-word letter addressed to the explicator in which you express and support your opinion. E-mail your letter to the class. Spend about thirty minutes on this assignment.

Credit

For this informal assignment, you will receive a check for each part if you do both parts according to the criteria.

Extra Credit Assessment

You can earn one additional check if you do the follow-up assessment. Reread your own original explication. Read the reaction letters. Write a 50-100-word assessment that identifies specific benefits and problems of this assignment in relation to your understanding of the poem. E-mail the assessment to the teacher's address.

Poems

"The Imaginary Iceberg" by Elizabeth Bishop
"I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke
"Gretel in Darkness" by Louise Gluck
"Captivity" by Louise Erdrich

Sample Student Explication and Letters to Student

The image "(She moved in circles, and those circles moved)" is from "I knew a Woman" by Roethke. This particular image is a way that he is showing one part of her seductive body language that he sees in her. This image is very seductive and permiscuous, and shows how carefully he has watched her every move. This poem shows such adoration and love through its use of specific language. The whole poem has a great deal of motion throughout its entirety. It's obvious that he watches and studies her constantly; therefore, he is always learning from her. She is in complete control of this relationship and he has no problems with that issue at all. In actuality he enjoys constantly learning from her, and not being dominant and in control. It seems as if he is at the point in his life that he knows what he can teach and what he now wants to learn. This seductive woman is whom he wants to learn from. This image shows the movement from teacher to student and from student to teacher. This also shows how willing he is to trade places with her and to learn.

Dear Ms. _____:

I agree with your view on Roethke's "I Knew a Woman." Stating that the woman was in complete control of the relationship with the gentleman who is obsessed with her every movement. "(She moved in circles, and those circles moved)," does suggest that there is some sexual undertones. It appears that this gentlemen is in fact obsessed with her body physically, with not knowing her intellect this seems to be shallow but when it comes to sexuality who really wants to get involved with the mental attachment? This poem suggests that there is a lot of movement in not only the woman but also with the gentleman. The poem deals with sexuality and promiscuity on the parts of both the woman and the gentleman.

Dear Ms. _____:

Your explication of the line in Theodore Roethke's poem "I Knew a Woman," was very accurate in my opinion. Your interpretation of the line, "She moved in circles, and those circles moved," certainly describes the seductiveness and control the woman had over Roethke. The circle within a circle movement is almost like some form of hypnosis that Roethke has undergone, almost willingly. This hypnotic effect has cost him his control over the situation but he does not seem to mind.

But, to be honest which man among us has not been swayed by the hypnotic effect women have over us. And for that matter which woman can claim to be ignorant of this technique.

Sincerely,

Dear Ms. Reiss,

Did you have the chance to read Ms. ____ 's explication of the poem "I Knew a Woman"? I read it and was happy to see someone else had the same view as I. I too say this was Roethke's way of looking at this woman as she moved. It seemed that she could have been going nowhere, and yet in his mind she was moving everywhere. I thought he was sort of degrading her in a provocative way at first, but I read the poem the poem several times and picked up on the way he was circling her with admiration. The punctuation that he put in the poem also helped. As mentioned by another classmate, the semicircles that were around "(She moved in circles, and those circles moved)" was a way of enclosing her maybe with his love for the way she moved and expressed herself. I also thought that the author wanted to stress that she was moving in circles and the circles moved too. It was like an aroma was following her and maybe the way she moved caught the attention of the air in the circle too. It's possible that this was an unmentioned love of Mr. Roethke's long past that he has circling among his memories. Thanks for listening.

English 241-American Literature I Fall 1993-Reiss

Romantic Fiction Group Project and Individual Paper

This project requires reading of a short story by Poe or Hawthorne, close analysis of that story, individual papers based on that analysis, reports by members of the group to the whole group, reports by each group to the class, and an individual documented paper by each student.

1. By November 12, read the story designated by the circled selection at the bottom of the page. Ideally, these groups will have three or four people in most cases. At the first group meeting (11/12), select individual areas of analysis, choosing among the following without overlapping: narrative point of view and its significance; conflict and resolution; tone; theme; and language. You can choose to concentrate on such stylistic devices as ambiguity or irony. You can select a passage of special significance and explicate it, showing its relevance to the story's meaning. Also bring a list of questions for your classmates and teacher about the story, one copy for the group and one to submit to the teacher. Credit: a check for your question or questions.
2. At the second meeting (11/15), bring two copies of a typed or handwritten 100-150-word analysis of your designated aspect of the story. Submit one copy to the teacher. Also bring a list of questions for your classmates and teacher about the story. This meeting will be your last chance to ask the teacher questions. You will comment on each other's analyses and collaborate to create a group synthesis of about 150 words in preparation for the **electronic discussion** on Wednesday, November 17. This synthesis will incorporate in a single paragraph or short essay the key elements of your individual discussions, relating them to the story's meaning in a coherent fashion. Be sure your paragraph has a clear focus expressed in a thesis statement and a title. Credit: a check for a clearly focused and supported analysis of the correct length.
3. **Electronic mail** in computer lab, Wednesday, November 17: Attend the workshop to learn how to use electronic mail. During the instructional session, you will be asked first to send e-mail to one classmate and then to reply to that classmate. Afterwards you will learn how to send e-mail to the entire class, including the teacher. Credit: a check for sending and replying as indicated.
   a. Your individual message must identify yourself and the story you are using for the assignment.
   b. Your reply to your classmate must briefly acknowledge receipt of the message.
   c. In the message to the class, #ENG24101, you must identify yourself, the story your group is writing

about, and the other members of your group.

d. You may or may not be asked to reply to the class, depending on the time and the lab director's instructions.

4. **Electronic mail** in computer lab, Friday, November 19: Gather with the other members of your story group and type an e-mail message to be sent to the entire class. Credit: a check for participation with the group.

   Type the 150-word synthesis you prepared on November 15. Edit it for accuracy. Give the paragraph a title. End with the names of all members of the group.

5. **Electronic mail** follow up: Sometime during the following week, before finishing your paper, read the e-mail messages related to stories by the same author you are writing about. Find an item in one of the messages that you can actually cite within your paper; take careful notes, and include the citation, crediting the idea to the group members by name. Your Works Cited citation should resemble the following format:

   Last name, first name, first name last name, and first name last name. "Title of Paragraph." Pegasus mail message, Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach, 19 Nov. 1993.

6. On Monday, 11/29, turn in your individual final paper on the story, a fuller development of the topic you have already done or of a related interest. This paper must be typed in correct MLA format without a title page, must include at least one and no more than three secondary sources from recent scholarly journal articles (no more than five years old), may use *Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism* or an article reprinted in a book if properly credited.

   Fogle, Richard. "Night and Day: The Darkness and Light Imagery in Hawthorne's 'The Wedding Knell.'" *American Literature* 54.3 (Fall 1991): 415-469. Excerpted and reprinted in Vol. 4 of *Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Marilynn Hunt and Fisher A. King. Detroit: Gale, 1992. 28-57.

   Note that your paper must also include a brief properly documented citation from one of the student group paragraphs sent to you by **electronic mail**. Credit: a major paper grade.

Selected Group E-mail Compositions

Lost One in the Forest

To analyze three different categories of "Young Goodman Brown," it is necessary to take into account Hawthorne's use of melancholy, ambiguity, and his use of conflict and resolution.

Firstly, Hawthorne uses very melancholy moods and situations revealing a very somber tone throughout "Young Goodman Brown." Hawthorne forces the reader to imagine a very naive man walking blindly into a mysterious setting. This makes Goodman Brown feel more alone and depressed than he normally would feel.

Secondly, Hawthorne's use of ambiguity leaves the reader with two possible, plausible meanings of what happened on his journey. Either he dreamed of his meeting with the Devil or he really did meet him and his congregation in the forest.

Finally, the character Goodman Brown has a conflict with his faith. He questions his beliefs and consequently withdrawals his trust from society. Because of this increasing doubt, Goodman Brown abandons his "faith." His hidden guilt causes him to isolate himself from everyone in Salem village, even his wife.

Whether Goodman Brown dreamed this experience or lived this experience, the result was that he isolated himself from Salem village and lived with darkness and melancholy.

Exploration of the Dark Side

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's story Ethan Brand, the main character proves that an extended search of the dark side of the human soul will lead to total self-destruction. Ethan Brand suffers from an inner conflict of "sin". This personal Unpardonable Sin is never clearly defined, reference "...the sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man, and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims!" (946), but it is made clear that Ethan Brand found this sin in his own heart, making his quest for this Unpardonable Sin foolhardy. His heart hardens as it absorbs his self-inflicted pain.

The imagery of darkness is used to further emphasize Ethan Brands evilness. For instance, Ethan Brand emerged from "the dark side intricacy of the surrounding forest." (944) and his insane laughter is described as

"slow", "heavy", "scornful", "solemn", and even "awful". Yet in contrast, the fierce light of the kiln is symbol to remind the reader of the undeniable truth, even the blue flames at the end of the story light up Ethan Brand's expression before he commits suicide by falling into the kiln. Even as he was dying, Ethan Brand concluded that the conflict of his Unpardonable Sin will never be resolved.

Ligeia seems to represent some form of ideal woman, not a real person; the narrator's description of her seems to say so: "in beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her". We do not even know her last name. If Ligeia may or may not be real, this leads to other questions, for example, could Rowena's death have been caused by the narrator himself? Poe seems to relish the idea that his subjective readers will endlessly be guessing at the answers.

Use of Literary Devices in "The Birth-Mark"

In "The Birth-Mark," Hawthorne's use of different literary devices to achieve a desired theme and tone provide the reader with a greater sense of the feelings the author is trying to convey. The major theme of the work is the folly in man's trying to alter or improve on God's creation. The birthmark itself is in the shape of a little hand providing a sense of God having laid His hand on His work as if to seal it from any attempt to change it. The overall somber tone, typical of much of Hawthorne's work, serves to reinforce a sense of impending disaster. The reader knows, or at least can guess, almost immediately what the outcome will be. Hawthorne's use of third person narrative in this story allows the reader a wider, more removed view of the action and so allows us to gain a deeper understanding of what the author is trying to say. Overall, the dark tone, the moral question of man's tampering with God's creation, and the reader's view from above as it were, provide an almost judgmental view of the science of the day. It appears as though Hawthorne's Puritan up-bringing had a serious influence on this story.

"The Fall of the House of Usher"—A Decaying Tale of Gloom

Edgar Allen Poe's use of imagery and detailed setting establish the tone in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The tone is gloomy, decaying, and oppressive.

The tone is depicted through the setting as early as the narrator's arrival. He describes the day as "a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn...when the clouds hung oppressively low." This passage evokes a sense of gloom and leaves the reader with a heavy oppressed feeling.

Poe continues this gloomy tone with imagery of the decaying Roderick. The "bleak walls...vacant eye-like windows.. white trunks of decayed trees..." of the Usher's estate reflect the "cadaverousness" appearance of its owner Roderick Usher.

Decay is made apparent when Roderick's "acute bodily illness" is mentioned. At this point it is obvious that one of the last Ushers is about to reach his death bed.

An example of oppressive tone is described in the area in which the coffin of lady Madeline was placed in a vault, "small, damp, and entirely without means of admission of light..." Poe's tone was very oppressive and full of gloom in most of his works but "The Fall of the House of Usher" was by far one of the gloomiest.

Passage from Student Final Paper Incorporating Citation from Classmate's E-Mail:

From Giovanni's first meeting with Baglioni, it becomes clear that the professor holds the infamous Dr. Rappaccini in bad stead when he tells the youth that the doctor "cares infinitely more for science than mankind" (927). By having the professor accuse Rappaccini of inventing more scurrilous poisons than Nature herself, Hawthorne touches on a theme also used in "The Birth-Mark," that of "man's trying to alter or improve on God's creation" (Mitchell et al.). Baglioni insinuates to the young student that the disreputable doctor may have some kind of evil fate in store for him. . . .

Bibliographic Entry from Student Final Paper Incorporating Citation from Classmate's E-Mail:

Mitchell, Jeremy, et al. "Use of Literary Devices in 'The Birth-Mark.'" Pegasus Mail Message, Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach, 19 November 1993.

(excerpted from student essay "The Perfidious Professor Meets the Doctor of Doom: Baglioni's Revenge," English 241, Survey of American Literature I—Reiss—Fall 1993)

English 242-American Literature II **Paired Letter Exchange** Spring 1995-Reiss

Pegasus E-mail Assignment: In pairs, write a letter to your classmate in which you ask a question about one of the works we have read so far this semester. Ask a question that will lead to clarification about some point that interests or concerns you. Answer your classmate's question in at least 50 words, being as specific as you can. Construct your questions and answers as letters.

Dear Ashlee,

Why do you think that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" uses the wallpaper as an escape from reality?

Abbi

I think that the narrator was crying out for help and her husband was unable to hear her. She needed a person to help her so she lost herself in the wall paper of her prison room. She made herself a friend someone that was not trapped by John's illness, the baby and every day life but a lady, who was free to wander in the gardens who was strog enough to entertain friends and be a real wife to John and mother to the child. By loosing herself in the wall paper she made everyone happy because she was able to become the wonderful lady she had created and to rest more which is what John wanted and to eat more because she was traveling with the wonderful lady. By loosing herself she made everyone happy and therefore created peace which is what she wanted a peaceful ending to a troubled life and mind.

Dear Jason,

Describe Crane's view of the universe as it is described in "The Open Boat" and his poetry that we reviewed in class. How do the charaters react to the universe's attitude in each work?

Good luck, Susan

Crane's view of the universe as described in the works that we went over in class clearly show that Crane feels that the universe is indifferent toward humankind's feelings or struggles; "flatly indifferent," he says in "The Open Boat." I think that in these works, the universe usually has the last word because it is much more powerful than any human being. Hope resides in the human soul though, and this may or may not give humans an edge over the universe but the characters of Crane's stories are not indifferent and they never give up the struggle but keep up their fight.

Dear Abbi,

In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," John's wife wrote in her journal that her life was much more exciting than it used to be because she has something to look forward to something to watch. She comments that she is eating better and is resting better. She does not however want to tell John it is because of the wall paper. What do you think would have happened differently if she could have escaped her prison with the lady she saw in the wall paper?

I think that if she could have escaped into the wallpaper with the lady that she saw in there that she really would have gotten better. She envied the lady in the wallpaper and she wished that she could be in there with her. I think that her whole problem was mental and that if she could escape into a world that she wanted to be in, then she would truly be a lot better.

Kara, In "The Souls of Black Folk," why do you think Dubois closes with words taken directly from the U.S. Constitution?

Cathy, I think that he closed with those meanigful words because he saw the true hypocrisy in the nature of the freed black man. Even though the black man was freed from slavery, Du Bois understood that the black race was not entirely free from inequality. It seems as if he is flinging those words into the faces who spoke them, yet still denies the meaning of those words to a great population.

Electronic Mail Project-English 111 **Definition Discussion** Fall 1994-Reiss

This project preceded a discussion of formal and informal definitions and extended definitions. At a subsequent class, students would review definitions in essays in their texts and would write extended definitions of their own. The objective here was to show them that they already understood the concept and to show them that people don't always understand the same word the same way. We used Pegasus mail in a networked computer lab.

E-mail Instructions to Students
Date: 6 Dec 94 11:10:58
Subject: Definition Part 1

Do not reply to this mail. Instead, ESC back to the main mail menu, select S to send mail, and use F6 to create a distribution list that includes yourself, the other members of your minigroup, and me (tcreisd). For the "short name" portion, type the term you are defining, for example, fire. Remember to press enter after each login name, to check that the spellings are correct, and to press CTRL-ENTER after the group is created.

Define the term you have been assigned. Define it any way you like. Your definition must be written in complete sentences and must be at least 50 words long. Send the definition to your group.

Read the definitions from the members of the group. Then SEND a new message to the whole class distribution group, #11130. Use the term and the word "analysis" as your subject, for example, "fire analysis." This new message must be at least 50 words and must analyze the similarities and differences among the definitions in an informal manner. Be sure to include reference to all the definitions you received. What have you learned about definitions from this process? Send this analysis to the group. You will receive a check as credit for each message.

Sample Definition: Fire

There are many ways to describe fire. Fire can be described as a chemical reaction. It is always hot and if not used carefully it can be described as deadly. You could also describe fire as a necessity of every day living because of the many uses it has. Fire is also colorful and fun to watch as long as its in the fireplace.

Sample Analysis of Definitions: Fire

Everyone in the group seemed to know what fire does and how fire feels but nobody really defined the word fire. We can all relate to the damage we have witnessed because of a fire. All the descriptions referred to the color of the flames and to the feel of fire as being hot. Even if we don't know what fire is we still respect it.

Sample Analysis of Definitions: Park

The three people in our group defined the word park. Two of us chose to define it as a pleasant place you go for a picnic outdoors, but one defined the word as a verb, and described the unpleasantness associated with parking in the city. A logical assumption is that parks received their names from the act of going to a specific place for recreation and (you guessed it) parking their ride.

Sample Analysis of Definitions: Snack

I found many similarities in the way may partner and I responded to the word snack. We both had written the same basic definition and even mentioned certain types of foods that are considered snacks. This exercise has shown me that people may describe things with the same underlying definition, but use different words and techniques to explain what they mean.

Sample Analysis of Definitions: Snack

The definitions of "snack" were very similar. In both definitions it was described as a "small portion," and that a snack came "inbetween meals." One point that differed was how the writing of the definition was approached. I used a straightforward definition and she used contrast to get her meaning across. This excercise proves that while certain words may have the same general meaning they still can be interpreted in may different ways. This forms a barrier in our communication with others in everyday life.

Sample Analysis of Definitions: Wave

The word "wave" was defined by three different people but yet we all three felt the same way toward the word in only one definition. We all described the word as a part of the ocean that swells up and is something that people can enjoy. Two of us, however, reached down further to find other meanings for the word. We defined it as also being a greeting signal with your hand. But only one of us even found a third meaning for the word, people standing and sitting in sequence at a football game and making a human wave. This process show the complexity in which different people will think about a word and its different meanings. Definitions can also depend on past experience and exposure to the word.